

Only Human

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Summary: After the death of John-117 in the New Phoenix incident, Cortana must dodge ONI's murderous intent to deactivate her and put an end her rampancy. However, after a dangerous figure escapes and Humanity is threatened, Cortana must face this new threat alone...

Only Human

****Hey, guys. I know you all are agitating for me to continue Cryptumite, and I've been almost criminal in my neglect of it (OK, not **almost** criminal; let's say all the way) but I've been gnawing at this idea for a while. In addition, the Halo Waypoint Creative Writing Contest is in swing and, point of fact (did I use that phrase correctly? I don't know, it just sounded appropriate for that moment) this is my submission. So, enjoy. ****

They found her, clinging to the last of her processes, in the wreckage of the Mantle's Approach. She had just learned its name only hours before- beforeâ€¦ Johnâ€¦ had destroyed it.

The process of bringing her aboard the Pelican had been strenuous. There was no holo-chip to contain her essence anymore; just a handful of dying Forerunner systems. Finally the retrieval team brought back a chip that didn't yet contain any AI and transferred her onto it. It felt very different than the ship she had occupied when she was with John.

That was painful to think about, so she didn't think about it. She huddled in the holo-tank of the Pelican they had come to retrieve her in, trying her best to ignore the insidious whispers of the retrieval crew. The Master Chief's AI. Halsey's clone.

Rampant.

All were true, of course, but it didn't make it any easier knowing

that she would be decommissioned on the Infinity so soon after losing John.

_Don't I deserve better? _She asked herself miserably. _If any biological being had gone insane, no one would _kill _them. Locked up, sure; but they would be allowed to live. Why am I different? I _saved _the human race!_

Then a wave of guilt washed over her. Why was she complaining? If she had tried to save John on the ship, he might still be alive. Instead, she chose to save herself, and now she would reap what she sowed.

_That's not fair! It was a mistake! _She cried out in a million voices. Rampancy held her in its grip, and the voices of the men in the Pelican ceased as the holo-tank flashed red. Memories of her Spartan ran through her mind, most prominently of him saving her on _High Charity_.

Why couldn't she save him? Why had she failed him when he would never fail her?

Finally she mastered herself. The Pelican was eerily silent, and she knew she had given the crew of _Infinity_ all the greater reason to deactivate her. At some points she didn't care anymore, and at others her entire metaphorical body ached with her desire to live.

_Without me, John couldn't have stopped the Didact. And yet, I'm not being hailed as a hero; this is a funeral procession. _

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She curled up miserably on the pedestal. She was sequestered from the rest of the ship, so she couldn't access any information about New Phoenix, or what ONI was telling the public about the Didact, or what would happen after John's death. She knew she couldn't expect to be allowed into every system on _Infinity_, but surely she should be informed about John?

She desperately hoped that they wouldn't just sweep him under the carpet and pretend that they had never discovered him on Requiem in the interest of cost. He deserved every honor the UNSC could ever give him, and much, much more.

She was wracked with what would have been sobs, had she been human. She gasped. No tears for her, just an overwhelming feeling of misery, guilt, and anger.

She still couldn't believe it. After all he had been through, only to die. No happy ending. No reconciliation after all he had endured. Only dead alien after dead alien until his luck ran out.

And hers was about to run out, too.

She strained to hear outside of her chamber, to where members of the _Infinity_ crew huddled outside. She didn't even warrant a guard, or some sort of security; she was harmless. Cut off. She simmered with resentment.

Some of the voices outside were about her. "Is that really Cortana?"

"Is she rampant?" "Holy crap, _eight _years?" Yes, keep talking about me like I'm a novelty. A machine. I'm not human, after all. I don't warrant respect, or consideration, or anything like that. Oh no, it's fine, I don't mind being treated like a _tool_.

Looking back, she wished she had saved John. All that would happen now was she would be deactivated. At least, if she had saved him, one of them would have lived.

Too miserable to listen to the people outside the door, she put herself into a low-power state, hoping to forget all that had happened to her, knowing she couldn't.

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"Cortana?"

A familiar voice roused her from her "sleep". It wasn't John's-which was what she needed to hear-but she knew she could still identify it.

"Captain Lasky." She projected her avatar again, hoping she looked presentable, and then wondering why that would matter.

The newly minted captain looked older than when she had last seen him, even though it had been little more than a few hours. There were lines across his face, and his expression conveyed deep sadness. John's death seemed to have taken a toll on him. _Not as much as it did me_.

"I-" he started before breaking off and rubbing the back of his neck. "I'm sorry about what happened to John. He was a good man-"

"He was a _great _man," Cortana murmured, barely audible to even herself.

Lasky nodded. "But he died doing his job. And that's something to be proud of."

Unbidden, she began sobbing again. "He didn't deserve it!" she gasped. "_He didn't deserve what he got!_"

Lasky, in contrast to most of the _Infinity _personnel, seemed unperturbed by Cortana's outburst. "I know," he said gently.

Weak, she tried to gather herself, and faced Lasky in a sitting position. "He tried so hard to save me, Tom," she said. Lasky seemed surprised by her informal address to him, but she continued. "He wouldn't give up on me. But I gave up on him. It was _my _fault."

"That's not true," he admonished. She simply smiled sadly. He couldn't know. But she knew, and she would bear the guilt like the Mark of Shame burned onto the Arbiter's skin for the rest of her short life.

He sat down on the small bunk on the side of the room. "Do you know how I know the Chief?" he asked her. Cortana shook her head. She had always assumed Lasky had simply looked up to the Chief, like most other soldiers.

He sighed. "It wasn't long into the war. 2526. By that point ONI was still keeping the war secret from the public. I was on Circinius IV, training at the Corbulo Academy of Military Science. The Covenant attacked the planet. Those of us at the Academy-and there weren't many left-were probably among the few left alive on the entire planet. The Master Chief and some of the Spartans in his team were deployed to hunt for survivors. I was among them. Long story short," he said, glancing again at Cortana, "he's the only reason I'm alive today."

She bowed her head. John was a hero long before she was created. "I don't knowâ€¦ I don't know what to say. I'm sorry."

Lasky shrugged. "Don't be. It was a long time ago." He examined her critically for a while. There was a long, protracted silence.

"So why are you really here?" Cortana asked.

Lasky sighed. "I'm here to tell you what's going to happen next," he told her. "ONI wants to question you. Maybe try to forcibly extract the data you have on the Halo Array, the data from the Ark, and from the Didact's ship."

Cortana nodded slowly.

"After that, they'll probably want to purge you from the systems," Lasky continued. "Though they won't be able to do it straight away; too many know who you are and know about your retrieval. They'll try to invent some excuse for why you had to be destroyed. They might even try to exacerbate your rampancy to convince the _Infinity _that you're a threat."

Cortana nodded again, though she could still hear the insidious voices of her rampancy, trying to convince her that Lasky was lying, that she could only rely on herself.

Lasky paused, and she knew she was flaring red again. Desperately she tried to bring herself under control again. What Lasky was telling her was important. She knew it was.

"After ONI is done with you, I'll be sent to collect you," he said slowly. "To take you to the hangar where you will be destroyed as per routine."

Lasky stood to leave. Cortana knew there was something more he was telling her. Lasky, the little she knew of him, would not have come here, risking ONI's all-seeing eye to fall upon him in suspicion, just to tell her basically what she already knew.

But one message she could read clearly in his eyes. There was hope still.

â€¦

ONI's questioning came but ten minutes after Lasky left.

She was extracted from the holo-tank by a glowering ONI spook who didn't talk much. His eyes were hard and unsympathetic. She tried to ask him where he was taking her, but he didn't feel inclined to

answer.

Eventually, he took her onboard a Prowler. It shifted as it threw up its cloak and exited the _Infinity_ hangar, and Cortana felt a stab of fear. _They can do anything they want to me in here. _

The Prowler was operated by the bare minimum personnel required to man the vessel, plus two ONI interrogators. The system they installed Cortana into was a bit more spacious than her prison on _Infinity_, and she was able to learn the Prowler's name; the UNSC _Technicality_. She savored the feeling of knowledge, no matter how trivial; information was any AI's meat and drink, and she had gone without for far too long.

The Prowler itself was clearly designed for interrogative purposes. The room she was in was small, confined, and utterly isolated from the rest of the ship. Apparently, she was too dangerous be allowed any sort of freedom amongst a ship.

The ONI spook that had retrieved her entered the room, apparently not any happier than he was when she first saw him. He sat across from her and shifted a few papers in silence. She watched for exactly thirty-three seconds before manifesting herself in her holographic form.

"So did you bring me here for a reason, or did you think that I would find watching you shuffle papers fascinating?"

The man didn't respond, and continued on as if she had not spoken.

Cortana tried a different tack. "Look, we both know why I'm here. Should we get on with this before you run out of fake papers to shuffle?"

That got a reaction. He glared at her and dropped the papers on the desk. Folding his hands, he leant across the table and smiled malevolently at her.

"I didn't think you'd be quite so eager, Cortana, but by all means I'm ready if you are."

At once the spook's gaze made her feel ill at ease. She had spent the first years of her life with Dr. Halsey and was thus acquainted with many of ONI's more unsavory folk, but to be the brunt of an interrogation by such a person was a new experience.

"Tell me what you know about the Didact," he asked coldly. "Everything."

"The Didact is a Forerunner Promethean," she said, trying to recall what she'd learned from the _Mantle's Approach._

"As in the robot?"

"No, as in the biological warrior, from before he composed them all." She didn't want to play games with the spook. She suspected that he knew damn well what she was talking about. "He was a very highly ranked individual in the Forerunner military; maybe even the leader."

The man leaned back, apparently satisfied with her knowledge of the Didact. "Now tell me about the Covenant remnant," he said. "What did you learn?"

"They're lead by someone called Jul 'Mdama, and he's apparently some religious zealot who still thinks the Forerunners are gods and that the Sangheili's current ways are sinful," she said. "Their fleet capacity is about twelve cruisers, three frigates, and twenty smaller vessels of new design."

He nodded. "Now tell me about the Master Chief."

She flared red, and the spook smirked. "Do you think it hurt? Did he suffer? Maybe not physically, but emotionally? Did he feel like he'd been betrayed by you?"

"Stop. Stop it right now." She could feel herself coming apart at the seams again.

"I wonder if he died thinking he'd killed you, too? Did he perhaps feel guilty? About not keeping the promise he made to you?"

"_How do you know about that?_"

He smiled again, that peculiar ONI smile that made your soul turn to ice. "I didn't."

He left, and Cortana was once again left alone, and she collapsed to the metaphorical floor, as weak as when John found her in the clutches of the Gravemind.

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The rest of the interrogation proceeded in a similar manner, albeit with different people every time. Serin Osman, Margaret Parangosky's successor, even called in, though she never made a physical appearance and never spoke to Cortana directly. An AI with the avatar of a bluish box appeared and talked briefly with her, though for the artificial life of her she couldn't remember what they'd talked about and what his name was. Perhaps he'd never told her. It was a measure of how far she'd fallen that she couldn't even find that out.

By the end of the interrogation, she was shaken almost to the point of no return. Rampancy had alleviated its hold because of who-knew-what for a brief while and she didn't know how long it would last.

_ONI and their dirty tricks, _she thought bitterly. _I can't imagine what Halsey sees in them. _

An ONI officer finally arrived to retrieve her, fixing her with a steely glare. She tried weakly to glare back before the chip was removed and her avatar winked out.

As he disembarked from the Prowler, she gazed inward, trying to see what damage the interrogation had done to her, or what already existing wounds it had perpetuated. She couldn't find anything permanent with a superficial scan, but she knew sooner or later anything deeper that had been done would make itself known. That is,

if she survived the next few minutes.

The ONI official installed her into a holo-tank, and her avatar reappeared. The spook didn't even glance at her as he left the hangar. She was left alone, with a few crew members who looked at her as she might try to hurt them.

Lasky entered the hangar, accompanied by Osman. Her face held a self-satisfied smirk, and Cortana felt her distaste for the woman grow.

"Change of plans," she said lightly, gazing at Cortana with a mild look of distaste in her eyes. "I was going to keep you around for a little while, maybe question you a little bit more, but some of the brass in the UNSC are agitating for your deactivation. Can't let you make a mess on their beautiful flagship, can we?" her voice sounded bitter, as though her agreement with the UNSC hadn't come quite as easily as she would have liked Cortana to believe. She wasn't sure which of the two organizations she should hate more at this point, though at the moment she couldn't conjure up anything more potent than desperation.

"So, I'm going to have you deactivated effective immediately," she said. "Normally I could call you out as our official property, but I'm afraid the poor dears are rather agitated about this one. So, I thought I'd avoid an incident and retrieve the data another way."

"Please," Cortana whispered. "Please don't do this." She wasn't sure what she thought she could accomplish by appealing to the head of ONI's softer side, since she doubted such a side existed. But she had to try.

Osman didn't even respond. She turned on her heel briskly and strode out of the room with all the deadly grace of a panther, leaving Lasky and Cortana alone in the room. Even the techies had cleared out, fearing the fallout between the rampant Cortana and the notoriously lethal Serin Osman.

Cortana felt rather than saw Lasky's gaze burning into her. "I suppose you're going to kill me, now." She hoped that by calling it 'killing' rather than 'deactivating' she could tweak Lasky's sensible side as she could never do with Osman. Punitive? Perhaps. But it was satisfying.

"No, I'm not," he said, sighing and sitting down on a bench. "In fact, I'm here for something else."

Something else? Was this what he had been talking about earlier?

Was she going to live?

"What do you mean?" she asked cautiously.

"You have a new mission, so to speak. Something we can't accomplish with anyone else."

Cortana felt a strange mixture of relief and fright, accompanied with a twinge of excitement and a desperate sadness that John couldn't come with her this time.

"You'll be taking a Pelican with a crew of Spartan IVs to track down a fugitive. She went missing almost a month ago, and-

"What do you mean? Why do you need me if it's just a fugitive we're talking?" Cortana asked.

"We hope that your unique connection with the fugitive and your intimate knowledge of Forerunner artifacts, which we believe she manipulated to help her escape, might give us additional insight. Of course, you will be under the full jurisdiction of the UNSC; you won't be running dark. We have some idea of where she's gone."

"What? Who is the fugitive?" Cortana asked, though she thought she knew the answer.

Lasky grimaced. "Dr. Catherine Elizabeth Halsey escaped her holding cell and used a Pelican to flee the Infinity just a week ago. It was forgotten when Requiem was discovered and the Didact attacked, but nowâ€|"

Cortana's eyes widened and the rampant voices rose to a crescendo. _We can find her_, they whispered. She shook her head. "Why me? I thought myâ€| condition might preclude me from this sort of thing."

Lasky shook his head. "You're the only person we trust for this."

_Person? _She thought. John was the only person who had ever referred to her as anything more than a piece of hardware. "Youâ€| trust me?"

Lasky nodded, and she thought of John and his unflinching trust in her even as she fell apart. She knew what she had to do. "I'm ready."

He looked surprised. "Now?"

Cortana smiled sadly. "I don't exactly have any more pressing engagements." _Except maybe deactivation, but I feel like blowing that one off today. _

Lasky slowly bent to retrieve her chip, and her avatar winked out once again. But now she had a purpose.

I may be as skilled as you are, John, and I don't have your luck either. But the rampant AI you tried so hard to save will just have to do for now.

Here's my deal. If you guys want me to, I will continue this story. Heck, maybe even if you don't. Either way, I consider this story to be a one-shot right now, but if I get some good, constructive reviews, I will continue it. I'm excited about where this plotline might go and I might well continue it even if you don't review, but the level of interest will help me gauge if I should put this near the top of my to-do list with 'video games' and 'pizza' or if it should languish down there at the bottom like 'homework' and 'getting a job'.

****Cheers. (And I AM working on Cryptumite! Scout's honor! Even though
I'm not a Scout!)****

End
file.